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## Furthering Democracy in Mexico

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From *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2006

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**Summary:** As it approaches its first presidential election in the post-PRI era, Mexico is at a crossroads: it could either consolidate democracy and proceed with needed reforms or fall back into a familiar state of crisis. Which way it goes will depend above all on the candidates of the three major political parties, who must rise above their short-term interests to further the nation's progress toward democratic stability.

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### A RETURN TO OLIGARCHY?

In July 2006, Mexico will have an opportunity to consolidate its democratic process for the first time in modern history. Only then will it be clear whether the political changes of the past five years have taken hold -- whether the country will go on building democracy and implementing much-needed reforms or instead fall into the sort of periodic crisis that has characterized too much of its past.

The 2000 presidential election was Mexico's first truly democratic national contest in a century, and the victory of Vicente Fox -- a former Coca-Cola executive running on the ticket of the center-right PAN (the National Action Party) -- put an end to 71 years of oligarchic rule by the PRI (the Institutional Revolutionary Party). In contrast to the electoral theater and pseudodemocratic displays of the previous seven decades, and much to the credit of then President Ernesto Zedillo, the election was an honest one, and its results were incontrovertible. Fox's victory in 2000 triggered hopes for profound change, and the opening days of his presidency were a heady time for Mexicans.

But it was not the first time Mexico had experienced such optimism. In 1911, Francisco Madero found himself at a similar turning point. He had become president after leading the first stage of the Mexican Revolution, but he was immediately bedeviled by a host of problems: a deeply divided Congress, an abusive press, the enmity of U.S. Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson, and the hatred of a military establishment nostalgic for Porfirio Diaz, the dictator whom the revolution had overthrown. Despite being noble in many ways, Madero was also impossibly careless and fatally naive. And thus, instead of marking the start of a stable Mexican democracy, Madero's brief government ended in 1913 when he was murdered in a coup d'état by General Victoriano Huerta -- setting off a civil war and plunging Mexico into chaos. The discord did not end until 1929, when President Plutarco Elias Calles founded the National Revolutionary Party (which would later become the PRI). The party was meant to guarantee a peaceful, predetermined succession for the presidency, and it laid the foundation for what came to be known as "the Mexican political system." The coming of democracy, meanwhile, was postponed until the end of the century.

As Fox's six-year term nears its end and the first post-PRI election approaches, Mexico's democracy faces new risks. It is worth remembering that the country's only previous experience with genuine democracy was brief and brought on a period of violent turbulence that ultimately led to the veiled dictatorship of the PRI. Can things work out differently in 2006?

Only basic agreement on the major objectives of the state can provide a society with a firm basis for democracy, and Mexico still very much lacks such an agreement among its principal political actors. The three major parties -- the PRI, the PAN, and the left-wing PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) -- are all amply gifted with resources, power, and rhetorical skill, but they have failed to establish any basic consensus with one another. The divisions among the three parties and their refusal to bridge them have kept contemporary Mexico in a state of governmental deadlock since the end of PRI rule.

This failure is most clearly demonstrated in the continual postponement of an urgently needed accord to ensure that no matter who becomes president, Mexico will be governable even when the president's party has a minority in Congress (as will be true for the foreseeable future). In a country where politicians have little parliamentary experience and are focused on ideology, any cooperation with an opponent is often denounced as betrayal. Nor is

there any basic agreement on how to establish a firm rule of law. Organized crime and the increasingly powerful drug cartels have turned too many Mexicans into innocent victims of an undeclared war (which some political factions do not even recognize, for selfish reasons of their own). And there are many other aspects of the national agenda riven by disagreements as deep and deaf to negotiation as was the discord that split the Mexican political class in 1913: there is no general agreement on the right way to create wealth, economic growth, or employment; on how to modernize the energy sector; on how to combat poverty and inequality; on how to approach and manage globalization. In the last six years, Mexico's political leaders have even failed to consider the value or the viability of the public institutions and the huge financial liabilities (such as those created by pension obligations and specific union privileges) left over from the old regime.

All this overt and latent enmity need not erupt into violence or antidemocratic agitation. The 2006 election could still demonstrate what 1915 -- when Mexico's first postrevolutionary election was supposed to be held but never was -- might have been. But for that to happen, various players must work to transcend their immediate interests. In order to safeguard the democratic process and encourage the broad, responsible, and thoughtful participation of Mexico's citizens, President Fox must behave as a head of state, not just a representative of his party. Civil society (and international observers of the voting process) must support the now-independent Federal Electoral Institute, which monitors elections, especially if the political parties refuse to adhere to recently established regulations, such as limits on campaign spending. The media must be scrupulous in their objectivity and impartiality, working to communicate honestly rather than simply inflame prejudices. This obligation includes the international media, which have a level of influence in Mexico of which they are not entirely aware; many Mexicans see foreign journalists as searchlights illuminating a dark political landscape, and their objectivity -- before, during, and after the elections -- is a matter of significant importance.

The major responsibility, however, rests with the three main political parties. It is up to them whether Mexican democracy advances or is cast aside, whether the gathering clouds of discord thicken or dissipate. Their recent histories -- and the nature of their candidates for the 2006 election -- give some indication of whether they will rise above their short-term interests and continue Mexico's progress toward democratic stability.

#### FOX IS A HEDGEHOG

The center-right PAN has existed for 66 years. From its beginnings as a minor opposition party within the firmly controlled oligarchic system administered by the PRI, the PAN has always been a strong advocate of electoral democracy. It showed an impressive (and sometimes heroic) tenacity in resisting and surviving the assaults of the PRI machine. But this has also meant that the PAN has usually been more focused on limiting power than on exercising it -- a quality that has hurt it since taking over the presidency.

When the PAN's historic moment arrived, it had in Fox a leader who, as the head of a huge pro-democracy movement, "moved souls" -- just as Madero had done in his initial presidential campaign against Díaz, in 1910. (That campaign was truncated by Madero's arrest, but the uprising it sparked lifted him to the presidency anyway.) For this impact, Fox deserves much credit. Still, Fox and his party bear some of the responsibility for the stagnation and the deterioration of political life during the past five years. His performance has been the target of a range of legitimate critiques, as well as a host of less noble attacks -- including the kind of ferocious newspaper cartoons that the press deployed against Madero during his presidency, helping to undermine his status as "the apostle of democracy."

As president, Fox has not done any major damage (unlike many of the PRI'S authoritarian presidents), but he has not done enough real good either. This failure in part stems from the composition of Congress: since the PAN is outnumbered, the PRI and the PRD have often been able to block Fox's projects. But the PAN deserves some blame for the frequent impasses as well. The party has maintained an incomprehensible distance from the president -- largely because of internal rivalries -- and has never presented the public with a clear and coherent list of necessary reforms. Fox himself has also shown significant limitations. In his personal style, he has been erratic, sometimes prone to rash decisions, absurd statements, and a lack of leadership at critical moments. His wife's frivolous behavior (such as publicly claiming to be governing jointly with the president) and attempted intrusions (without any real qualifications) into the process of government have further hurt his reputation. And his cabinet choices have not helped either. In 1967, one of the PAN's founders said that should the party ever win the presidency, its leader should make every effort to select the best possible people for his cabinet -- perhaps even reaching beyond the party and negotiating a government of national unity. In contrast to that vision, Fox's cabinet has generally consisted of mediocre loyalists and has had a frequently shifting makeup and too many inexperienced members.

In spite of all this, Fox has retained a certain amount of public affection. His lingering popularity largely stems from the fact that he has not become corrupt, notwithstanding some charges to the contrary. Many ordinary Mexicans view him as "a good person." Moreover, he deserves credit for some real accomplishments. He has succeeded in preserving macroeconomic stability (although without reducing unemployment or significantly improving growth). He has respected the division of powers, the independence of the judiciary, and the principles of federalism. He has introduced and implemented a law requiring open financial accounting in government, which has certainly reduced corruption. Labor and management have generally been at peace, and various democratic reforms, for which the cornerstone was laid under Zedillo, have continued and been expanded. And Mexico now enjoys true freedom of expression, an important achievement.

But Fox has also been a disappointment for many. A great leader during the campaign, he has been a colorless president. He has not fulfilled his promises to fight crime and insecurity (a critical failure in the view of many Mexicans) and to generate tangible social progress (his apparent commitment to which won him much support among poor Mexicans in 2000). Fox is likely to occupy a place in history very much like that of his Polish friend Lech Walesa: remembered as a brave and beloved figure in the struggle against authoritarianism but a failure in handling the reins of power.

The final judgment on Fox will affect the fortunes of the PAN candidate in 2006. Although the PAN might deserve a second chance, if only for its contributions to Mexico's democracy, actually winning another election is likely to be difficult. The party has, however, found an excellent candidate in Felipe Calderón. The son of one of the party's founders, he is honest, intelligent, experienced, a skilled debater, and, at 43, relatively young. If Calderón and the PAN can manage to win the presidency, the prospects for an effective government will depend in part on his political skill and strength as a leader, but even more on his capacity to establish alliances with disaffected members of the other two parties -- something easier said than done. PRI traditionalists would probably ally themselves with the PRD in Congress, leaving the PAN a minority in the House and the Senate once again. In that case, Calderón's victory could be a bitter one, because he would encounter the same kind of congressional resistance that has hobbled Fox. Mexico would have to wait until 2012 to start truly debating and undertaking necessary reforms -- and such a long wait could cause a return to instability.

With seven months left before the elections, however, it is probable that the PAN will be punished because of the widely held perception that Fox has not governed effectively. If that turns out to be the case, the PAN will have a chance to draw lessons from its brief experience with power, to encourage the rise of new leaders, to renew its image and its now-antiquated platform, to distance itself from stubbornly reactionary positions (still strong within the party) on social and moral issues, and to prepare itself for the elections of 2012. As a strong party of opposition, the PAN could do what it has always done best: fight to limit power and, in some measure, channel it; perform responsibly in Congress; help to clarify issues for the public; and continue to struggle in general for democracy and political harmony. And it can push for its economic program, which supports globalization, foreign investment, and orthodox fiscal and monetary policies.

## PERFECT DICTATORSHIP, REDUX

After losing the presidency in 2000, the PRI has regrouped more successfully than almost anyone anticipated. In fact, the defeat may have been to the PRI's long-term benefit, because it gave the party a chance to start cleaning up its image.

The PRI is an ideological chameleon: it can push nationalist and corporatist measures, or it can push openness and globalization -- whichever is most convenient at any given moment. But the moral burden of its past is considerable. Under PRI rule, Mexico enjoyed decades of stability and economic growth, and, with the exception of the tumultuous years of the late 1960s and early 1970s, violent confrontations were few and far between. But everything was a gift from above, from a power that lacked democratic legitimacy and was managed by an ever more corrupt oligarchy, entrance to which could be secured only by working within the PRI.

When Zedillo became president in 1994 -- after the chosen PRI candidate that year, Luis Donaldo Colosio, was assassinated -- he recognized that the party's hold on power was starting to slip, and he opened the gates to electoral democracy. Many PRI hard-liners wanted to expel Zedillo from the party for accepting the results of the vote that brought Fox to power, but the party's leaders eventually recognized their defeat -- in part because they understood that by peacefully accepting their fall from power, they could begin to sanitize their long record of authoritarianism and corruption. In typical fashion, the PRI reoriented itself and, treading very carefully, set about reviving its

political fortunes.

Losing the presidency again in 2006 could be a terminal blow for the PRI. A major loss could even lead to the breakup of the party, with some of its factions defecting to the PRD (this process could even start to happen before the election itself, if the advance of the PRD candidate and current presidential front-runner, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, appears to be unstoppable). If the PRD ends up winning the presidency, the PRI could perhaps avoid dissolution by allying itself with the PAN, thus forming a barrier against the emergence of a new single-party political monopoly. This alliance would also force López Obrador -- who as mayor of Mexico City has enjoyed complete dominance of all branches of municipal government -- to avoid pushing dangerously radical policies.

A presidential victory for the PRI is not, however, beyond the bounds of possibility. Should voters come to fear that a PRD government would prove too radical and a PAN government too inexperienced, the PRI may become an attractive lesser evil. If the PRI wins, in addition to the presidency, enough seats in Congress, it could offer some positions in government to the PAN. Together, the PRI and the PAN could secure a workable legislative majority, one that would be able to enact needed structural reforms. To ward off the dangers of crippling dissension and even violence, the PRI would also have to extend the same offer of "cohabitation" to the PRD, although the PRD would be unlikely to accept it.

The PRI is no longer synonymous with "the Mexican political system," but its 71 years of power continue to weigh heavily on its reputation and possible future. Although its ranks include many experienced political professionals, a number of them honest men and women, the party has no prestige or credibility among younger Mexicans. It has, however, put forward some strong, qualified candidates for municipal and state offices, along with the usual stable of corrupt local chieftains. Its current candidate for the important office of mayor of Mexico City, for example, is Beatriz Paredes, an intelligent woman with considerable experience.

The PRI would have been wise to choose a presidential candidate with a fresh face and a reputation for honesty -- someone like Paredes, who has a moderate, pragmatic left-wing ideology that could have proved very attractive to Mexican voters. Unfortunately, it has instead picked a highly problematic figure: the current party president, Roberto Madrazo, who is closely linked to the PRI's dark past of manipulation, corruption, and disinformation. Although the party no longer seems as united behind Madrazo as it once did, and a struggle has lately broken out between Madrazo and the powerful head of the teachers' union, Elba Esther Gordillo, Madrazo will represent the PRI in 2006. By selecting him, the PRI has shown disdain for the moderate Mexicans from whom it could have drawn support, and it has succumbed to its traditional predilection for authoritarianism and manipulation. As a result, it would be only fair if the PRI's political purgatory continued for at least another six years.

#### CHILE OR VENEZUELA?

Throughout the twentieth century, the Mexican left veered between periods of being proscribed and persecuted and periods of proximity to power (although always within the overall structure of PRI control). For more than half a century, much of the left turned its back on liberal democracy, which it castigated, not entirely unfairly, as not concerned enough with the social problems of the vast majority of Mexicans. Instead of putting their faith in democracy and reform, Mexican leftists preached socialist revolution. (However, at times -- especially under left-wing President Lázaro Cárdenas, who served from 1934 and 1940 and became one of the PRI's most important historical figures -- the left did enjoy considerable political influence within the PRI's ideologically ambiguous power structure.)

By the 1970s and 1980s, some members of Mexico's left had resorted to outright guerrilla war (among them the man who would go on to become the Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos), holding on to their particular version of Marxist orthodoxy and remaining disdainful of "formal" or "bourgeois" democracy. But many others, in response to a gradual political opening by the PRI, began to consider the possibility of entering the parliamentary process as a legitimate opposition. In 1989, this camp came together to help form the PRD. A year earlier, former President Lázaro Cárdenas' son, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, had run for president as the head of an impromptu left-wing coalition and been the victim of what was very probably a stolen election. Just as Cárdenas was piling up a huge majority in Mexico City, where one-fifth of the Mexican population lives, there was a mysterious "computer breakdown"; when the computers, controlled by PRI vote counters, came back online in the morning, they showed a slim victory for the PRI candidate, Carlos Salinas. Cárdenas resisted the entreaties to violence made by many of his supporters -- doing a great, and too little recognized, service to his country and its movement toward democracy -- and instead called for active, united, left-wing participation in parliamentary politics. The result was the PRD.

When it was formed, the PRD consisted of disenchanted members of the PRI, former communists and socialists, and members of a newer left-wing camp brought together by nongovernmental "community action" organizations. The PRD has had an impressive run since, winning governorships, mayoralties, and legislative seats, especially in central and southern Mexico. In 1997, Cárdenas was elected mayor of Mexico City, the second most important position in the country. As the PRD candidate in the 2000 presidential elections, he lost to Fox (a man more skilled in modern U.S.-style electoral politics), but he accepted defeat and returned to party activism to ensure that the PRD did not fracture in the wake of the loss. The results have been positive. In Michoacán, the state once governed by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas' father, Lázaro Cárdenas, and by Cuauhtémoc himself in the early 1980s, the governorship was won by Cuauhtémoc's son -- a man gifted with practical intelligence, much good luck, and a name, Lázaro Cárdenas, with almost mythological resonance in Mexico. In Mexico City, the mayor's office was won by Cuauhtémoc's political heir, López Obrador, a formidable social activist from the southern state of Tabasco -- and now the PRD candidate and the front-runner in the presidential race.

The PAN's political fortunes in 2006 will depend on how voters judge the Fox administration, and the PRI's fortunes will depend on how much voters associate the party with stability and continuity; the PRD's prospects, in contrast, will depend almost entirely on the charisma of López Obrador. To be sure, López Obrador is not certain to win. For one thing, he and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas have grown apart, and Cárdenas -- concerned with what he sees as López Obrador's intolerance and convinced that his own program for Mexico is more inclusive and open than the one López Obrador has proposed -- might conceivably still contend for the presidency, from outside the PRD if necessary. Calderón, the PAN candidate, has also been doing better in recent polls, in part because he is not directly associated with the Fox administration. In the event of a near loss, the PRD would hopefully prove prudent enough to refrain from any mass civil disobedience, which could lead to upheaval and even violence. And fortunately, the election authorities now have enough credibility and independence, and help from outside observers, to guarantee honest elections and prevent a reversion to fraud.

At the moment, however, a PRD victory is likely. Such a result would be entirely understandable. For the majority of its citizens, Mexico is still a very poor country -- a shameful reality that has given the left considerable appeal. Whatever the weaknesses of certain of his policy proposals, López Obrador owes his political advantage to his seriousness in accepting and confronting this burden -- a concern for the poor that gives him a connection to some of the core ideals of the Mexican Revolution. A victory for the left would also be understandable as a reaction by the public to the real and perceived failures of the Fox government. After 71 years of PRI rule and six years of fumbling by the PAN, voters may well think that it is someone else's turn now. Many Mexicans also share a general disenchantment, increasingly common across Latin America, with free-market reforms and the perceived neglect of social problems under such reform programs.

In many ways, a victory for a modern left-wing movement -- much like those that govern Chile and Spain -- would be the best possible result for Mexico in 2006. Regrettably, it is highly unlikely that the PRD can become such a party. The PRD has favored retaining complete state dominance of the oil and electrical industries and has been suspicious of free markets, labor reforms, foreign investment, and the process of globalization -- a body of preconceptions that cannot be rigidly adhered to by a modern party of the left. (Perhaps it is only the day-to-day exercise of power that can force a left-wing movement to adjust its ideological schema to reality.) Meanwhile, many members of the Mexican left have shown ambivalence or outright hostility toward many of the most positive aspects of liberal democracy: limits on the extent of government power, especially to prevent absolute power from being concentrated in the hands of a single office but also to prevent the manipulation of power through messianic demagoguery; a full commitment to the autonomy of the judiciary and the division of powers, to freedom of expression, and to complete financial openness and accountability in government; a respect for autonomous institutions such as the central bank; and a distaste for violence, especially when reforms can be accomplished peacefully. These are all necessary principles in an open society, and some of López Obrador's past behavior (showing a propensity toward the rhetoric, mass mobilization, and class polarization of traditional Latin American populism) suggests that he may not respect them. A failure to honor these principles at the national level could put the process of democracy itself at risk.

If the PRD does win, and especially if the victory is by a large margin, it must put aside any temptation to revive the one-party state. As president, López Obrador would face a trial by fire. If he honors the principles of an open society, of legality and individual rights, he will have every right to implement his social and economic projects, so long as he operates in the realm of reality rather than abstract ideology. But if López Obrador -- or whoever else manages to win the presidency -- denies these principles, then Mexico will have lost yet another opportunity to consolidate its democracy.

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